
FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE SLOT MACHINE ASSOCIATION TO PREVENT MAJOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEMS

Public health has developed favourably in Finland for the most part. Perceived health is considerably better in all age groups than it was 20 years ago. Life expectancy has risen by 3-4 years among the working-age population in the past couple of decades. Surveys nevertheless indicate that slightly over 40% of adult Finns suffer from chronic diseases. Major public health problems include cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic pulmonary diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, allergies, diabetes and mental health disorders. These also have significant direct and indirect economic impacts. Type 2 diabetes in particular is expected to cause considerable pressure on public health costs in the near future.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health directs and supervises the development of social welfare and health-care services and policies in this area. According to the Primary Health Care Act, local authorities are mainly responsible for arranging preventive health-care services. Non-profit organizations also play a key role in preventing public health problems, since the Slot Machine Association channels large amounts of funding through them each year. Promoting health and functional capacity and preventing major public health problems have been one of the Slot Machine Association's key focuses in recent years. In 2005 the Slot Machine Association granted 305 million euros to non-profit organizations. The effectiveness of development activities supported in this way has been emphasized increasingly in recent years. Funding provided by the Slot Machine Association is public funding and is subject to the same effectiveness objectives as other publicly funded activities.

The goal of the present audit was to evaluate the effectiveness of funding provided by the Slot Machine Association to prevent major public health problems as well as the preconditions for effectiveness and factors influencing them. In order to gain a full picture, the au-

dit also looked at the supervision of funding as well as decision-making procedures. The preconditions for effectiveness were evaluated by taking a closer look at seven projects. These concerned the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, mental health disorders, musculoskeletal disorders and diabetes. Key non-profit organizations and recipients of funding are the Finnish Heart Association, the Finnish Rheumatism Association, the Finnish Association for Mental Health, the Finnish Diabetes Association and the Cancer Society of Finland.

The audit concluded that the role of non-profit organizations in preventing major public health problems is unclear. Although arranging preventive health-care services is the responsibility of local authorities under the Primary Health Care Act, promoting health has been left up to non-profit organizations in many respects. Preventive health-care tasks have increasingly been allowed to slide out of the public sector. In practice projects focusing on particular problems and diseases are often directed by non-profit health organizations. The audit revealed that organizations do not always have the resources to conduct broad action programmes, however. Furthermore, projects aimed at preventing major public health problems require a long-term approach, and therefore projects should be linked to other preventive activities arranged by local authorities, for example. Local authorities are not always familiar with projects funded by the Slot Machine Association. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, this shows that social welfare and health-care projects should be coordinated better in the administrative sector as a whole.

In recent years the Slot Machine Association has made an effort to include broader development projects alongside traditional programmes, including actors in the public and private sectors as well as non-profit organizations. The goal has been to achieve coordinated programmes to prevent major social welfare and health problems. The audit indicated that progress has not been made in this direction, and in 2005 project proposals were still quite organization-centred. Not enough joint projects have been arranged by local authorities and non-profit organizations.

The expert group on cardiovascular diseases and diabetes that operates in connection with the National Public Health Institute has proposed that the focus of funding provided by the Slot Machine Association should be shifted to broad and long-term programmes.

The State Audit Office concurs with this proposal. At the same time it is important for effectiveness to ensure the careful planning of programmes and the expertise this requires. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health should take responsibility for coordinating programmes aimed at preventing major public health problems. In view of the growing economic significance of public health problems, preventive work should receive more attention at the national level. Practical work should not be left up to non-profit organizations.

The audit also investigated performance management concerning funding provided by the Slot Machine Association to prevent major public health problems and related reporting. The observation was made that performance targets mainly describe the focusing of activities, and performance agreements do not contain more specific operational targets. Shortcomings were also observed in reporting, with the Slot Machine Association failing to report comprehensively on the achievement of targets. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the supervisory relation between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Slot Machine Association would be clearer if an ownership policy framework were defined for gaming activities, which are based on exclusive rights. This would clarify the ministry's supervision of the Slot Machine Association.

The audit also investigated the preparation of funding by the Slot Machine Association, decision-making principles and criteria, and their practical application to projects aimed at preventing major public health problems. Attention was drawn to the meagre resources of the Slot Machine Association's Funding Activities Department and the large number of applications received each year. Owing to the large number of projects, the Slot Machine Association has not been able to monitor projects in detail or follow them up. Project applications are not reviewed by experts. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the Slot Machine Association should consider inviting statements and having experts review applications, particularly since preventing major public health problems is one of its key focuses.

A significant shortcoming is that the Slot Machine Association does not have documented and public criteria for funding decisions. The audit showed that the criteria used in the preparation of funding are scattered in different documents, such as the strategy document,

application guides, funding bulletins and training presentations. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, criteria should be clearly assembled and published. Funding provided by the Slot Machine Association is discretionary state aid coming from public funds, and decision-making should take place according to generally known and published criteria. Clear and documented criteria would also benefit organizations in planning development projects and preparing applications for funding. Criteria could serve as good project indicators and in this way the Slot Machine Association could inform organizations of quality requirements for good projects.

The audit took a closer look at seven projects to investigate the effectiveness of programmes aimed at preventing major public health problems and the preconditions for effectiveness.

Shortcomings were observed in the planning of projects and the setting of targets. In some cases targets were unrealistic. Very few measurable or time-bound targets were set, although project applications mentioned the development of indicators. The observation was made that the most successful projects or parts of projects were those in which target setting was clear and detailed. Preventive projects should strive to set targets as concretely as possible and should pay attention to defining short- or medium-term targets. This would also promote the development of indicators. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the development and use of project planning tools would benefit organizations in the public health field.

The audit found that projects focused on established activities such as training and communications. Few projects involved group activities, screening or the development of new operations models. Since the main form of activity was training and communications, this also influenced the definition of the main target group. This was health-care professionals, and only in rare cases were concrete activities aimed at a particular risk group.

Organizations' communications in the projects that were examined mainly involved different types of campaigns. The challenge for the effectiveness of communications is to reach those population groups that need information the most but are not reached by present communications, according to studies. This requires that health counselling and guidance should be provided on a sufficiently individual basis so as to achieve the desired results. This task belongs most naturally to basic health care or occupational health care. In

the opinion of the State Audit Office, there is a need for a broader selection of means, but non-profit health organizations' limited natural interface places practical restrictions on activities aimed at risk groups, for example. The Finnish Diabetes Association's programme for the prevention of Type 2 diabetes is a good example of a project in which municipal health care is strongly involved in activities, however.

Most of projects' results were different kinds of performances such as training sessions, communications campaigns and materials. Studies and evaluations concerning projects also provided information mainly on performances and activities, but reporting on the desired change itself was quite meagre. The lack of information on effectiveness was explained partly by inadequate resources. Evaluating the effectiveness of projects was nevertheless included in applications for funding.

The audit showed that the economic viewpoint was overlooked in practically every evaluation and study concerning preventive projects. This was despite the fact that many project applications mentioned the economic burden of a particular public health problem on society. The results of some projects were quite modest, compared with the amount of funding and original targets. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, more attention should be paid to value for money in the Slot Machine Association's funding activities.